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C O N F I D E N T I A L GUATEMALA 000135

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SUBJECT: MURDERS OF BUS DRIVERS PUT GOG UNDER PRESSURE

Classified By: Ambassador James M. Derham for reasons 1.4 (b&d).

¶1. (U) Summary: On February 5, five bus drivers and one assistant were killed in attacks across the capital. Robberies and attacks directed against the public transportation sector are routine, but the number and nature of the February 5 attacks has sparked intense media coverage, opposition criticism of the GOG's security plan, and work stoppages by transit employees. President Colom has publicly defended his administration's new security plan, and alleged that organized crime is trying to destabilize his government. Conspiracy theories abound, but what is clear is that the new government is under tremendous pressure to address the problem of violent crime. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On February 5, five bus drivers and one assistant were killed in separate attacks, followed by the killing of another bus driver on February 6. Bus drivers are a common target of extortion by gangs and organized crime, but the timing of the recent attacks have made headlines and fueled talk of a conspiracy against the Colom Administration. The fact that none of the drivers was robbed lends credence to speculation that the killers were trying to send someone a message, but it is unclear if the killings are in fact related. At least some of the killings maybe in retaliation for the February 4 shooting deaths of two would-be bus robbers. Other attacks, such as the two assailants dressed as clowns who gunned down a 63-year old bus driver, could well be isolated acts aimed at those who refused to pay protection money to gangs.

¶3. (U) On February 7, bus drivers blocked traffic and off-loaded passengers to protest the recent killings. The protest snarled traffic in some working-class neighborhoods and led to altercations between the National Police (PNC) and bus drivers, resulting in at least one death before traffic returned to normal. Shortly after the protest ended yet another bus driver was gunned down in a different part of the city.

¶4. (U) Colom has publicly alleged a conspiracy by organized crime to undermine his administration, and described the killings as a response to new security measures he implemented. Opposition leaders have used the deaths to attack the GOG's community policing plan, and called on Colom to work with them on the issue. Some pundits link the attacks to corrupt elements within the military and police, while others point to Colom's recent decision to remove 72 senior army officers from active duty.

¶5. (C) A member of Military Intelligence (D-2) appears to believe the attacks are related, and stated privately that Colom blamed the D-2 leadership for failing to predict or

prevent the attacks. The same source reported that 900 members of the military reserve have been brought in from the countryside to provide additional security. Colonel Jose Lemus, the Commander of the Mariscal Zavala Brigade which conducts joint patrols with the PNC in some of the most crime-ridden parts of the capital, downplayed rumors of an anti-government conspiracy, stressing that the attacks were simply gang-related. He added that the decision had been made to place joint military and police patrols on buses, but that the GOG simply did not have the manpower to protect all of the estimated 20,000 buses in the city. He told POLOFF that there were also plans to add 3,000 more military that there were also plans to add 3,000 more military reservists to the joint patrol program, but he was unsure if the Administration would provide the necessary funding.

¶6. (C) Colom stated privately to the Ambassador that the GOG lacked the necessary resources to effectively combat criminal organizations, noting that Guatemala had essentially the same number of police today as it had in the 1980's. He added that the large number of PNC personnel assigned to non-patrol functions limited the GOG to only around 3,800 officers for patrol duties in Guatemala City.

GOG Experimenting with Community Policing

¶7. (C) On January 30, President Colom launched "Plan Cuadrante" targeting high crime zones in the downtown area. The plan divides high crime areas of the city into eight-block patrol zones, covered by a pair of police on foot and supported by roving vehicle patrols. The plan is modeled on a Chilean community policing program and includes Chilean Carabineros serving as advisors. By permanently assigning officers to small patrol areas it is hoped that the program will increase local confidence in the PNC, create local buy-in and information sharing, and demonstrate increased GOG focus on security. Colonel Lemus stated that the main purpose of the GOG plan was to "increase visible police presence and thereby increase the community's perception of security." When questioned whether the plan would actually reduce crime he stated that crime levels were already lower than last year, but what was needed was to combat the public's increasing sense of insecurity.

¶8. (C) Comment: It remains unclear whether the recent spat of killings are part of an anti-government conspiracy, are an organized gang action, are merely an uptide in crime, or are something else. What is clear is that, they have highlighted a growing sense of insecurity in parts of the capital reinforced by a constant stream of negative press coverage. If the killings and strikes continue, this could develop into a serious challenge to the new administration.

Derham